

Sanctuary

THE STORY OF NATURALIST

MARY MAJKA

DEBORAH CARR



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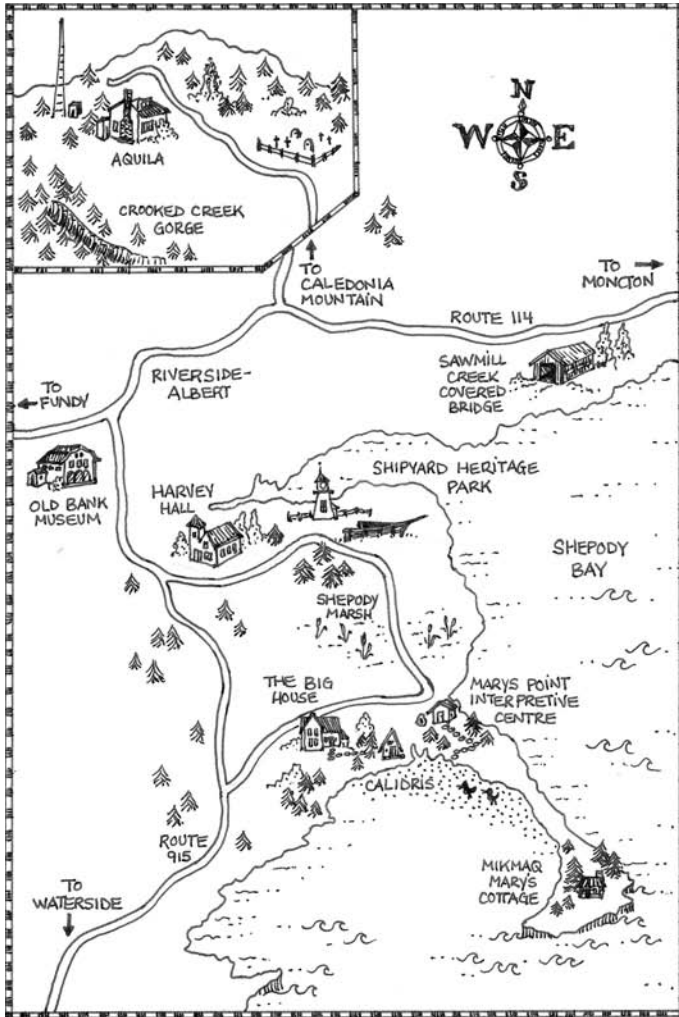
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Throughout my life, I was very much aware that it is not what you have, or what you do, or what you achieve that makes happiness. It is your personal dream, your personal aims that will bring you happiness.

*Mary Majka
August 23, 2005*



(Artwork by Brenda Berry)

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Preface

When it was quiet, you had the feeling you were alone, you were the crown of the mountain. They called me Mountain Mary or Queen of the Mountain. And I was. The Queen of My Territory.

Mary Majka

It is not an easy thing to excavate a life, to dig into depths long buried and bring air and light to darkness.

My decision to write a biography of Mary Majka stemmed at first from hoping to document the life and accomplishments of this extraordinary woman. I will never forget our regular Thursday afternoon interviews, drinking African tea in the sunroom of her present home at Mary's Point, listening to memories and anecdotes and tales that shifted from Poland to Austria to Ontario and, finally, to New Brunswick. She was — is — a remarkable interview subject.

Our interviews for the most part were full of intensity and humour. As with all relationships, we had moments of miscommunication and frustration. Some of these moments arose because of our differing backgrounds: me, a self-taught writer from rural New Brunswick; she, a Polish girl born and raised in wartime Europe, forced to endure imprisonment, starvation, displacement, and emigration.

Yet over the months and years of our time together, I came to feel that Mary's biography embodied something larger than a simple recording of events, dramatic though they were.

Mary often referred to her character as a kaleidoscope — and I tended to agree — it shifted and changed and rearranged itself each time I tried to focus.

“What is it that makes me the way I am?” she asked herself as a teenager. She finally decided it just happens. “When you pick a bouquet of flowers, they are all uniform, but there will be one a little taller, or a different colour, or some small difference. Perhaps this is who I am.”

She lives at the sharp edge of emotion, in all its extremes. Truthfully, I sometimes despaired that I would never really know her. In the beginning, she told me that she was a composition of all who had lived before her, tempered by those who touched her each day of her life.

It is a chilly day in April 2007 when Mary Majka, David Christie, and I drive the rubbled road up Caledonia Mountain in southeastern New Brunswick to visit their former homestead. Flurries swirl beneath an overcast sky. The view across the valley is muted, like a faded photograph. I notice the gentle shape of the land, the hills and valleys as softly contoured as a face in repose. Farther down the valley, most of the snow has melted, but at this higher elevation, crusty patches remain in shadowed spaces. Spring always comes last to Caledonia Mountain. This is a harsh and wild place. In this way, Caledonia Mountain has changed little in the forty years since “Mountain Mary” and her family were its only permanent residents.

But now, as ATVers and snowmobilers gather in noisy groups to cruise the woods roads and paths dissecting the landscape, and hunting camps line the roadway, it is gradually becoming more appreciated as a location for year-round homes with a view.

It was partly the increase in motorized vehicles that eventually drove the Majkas to seek the quieter refuge of nearby Mary’s Point on the Bay of Fundy. Mary’s Point, the place so closely associated with Mary Majka that many assume it took her name. Mary’s Point, scene of her greatest triumph and some of her deepest sorrows.

Reaching our destination, David parks on the frozen ground by a dirt driveway. Mary announces she will stay in the car. She had no reason to join David and me today and could have remained at home where it was warm. But like pepper and salt, Mary and David, often mistaken for the Majkas’ adopted son, are rarely seen apart. For years she danced with grace through meadows of hawkweed and daisies. Now she lists like a wave-rocked ship, relying on the wheeled walker that also accompanies her everywhere. She has brought a book to read while she waits. Idleness is not a characteristic she embraces. At age eighty-four, she says, she is tired but still has much to accomplish. Thoughts of unfinished business frequently trouble her mind.

On this cold spring day on Caledonia Mountain, Mary is petulant and impatient,

perhaps feeling the frustration of a young soul trapped in an aging body. She can no longer manoeuvre the rough terrain she once knew as intimately as her own skin. The paths and trails she once prowled as effortlessly as a coyote are grown over. She must find contentment in sunshine and memories. Yet she insists she doesn't miss the freedom of her young body. She has lived and accepted each season of her life. This is her winter.

David leaves the engine running so she will be warm. "I won't be long," he promises, closing the car door.

A wet wind blows past and he shivers. Dwarfed by a bulky parka, he slides on oversized black gloves. Grey wisps of hair escape a knitted toque, and pilled pants bunch above the rim of loose rubber boots. An expensive digital camera swings from his narrow shoulder and Bausch & Lomb binoculars thump against his thin chest.

We walk past a three-storey weekend home built by the current owner of the property and down a lane lined with mature birch, spruce, and fir that shield us from the wind. Our footsteps crunch as we step around piles of rotting snow. Discarded machinery, sheet metal, and several decrepit vehicles lie beside or against the trees.

"These trees were just small when I first came here," says David, sweeping his arm outward, ignoring the rusted heaps. "This field had masses of blueberries and in some places wild strawberries. We'd fill the freezer, and then the dogs would eat what was left off the bushes. And mushrooms . . . we gathered all kinds of different mushrooms. Our favourite patch was across the road." He grins. "I'd never gathered mushrooms before coming to live here."

About forty-five metres ahead, the lane opens to a field, and there it is: Aquila, the deserted Caledonia Mountain home of the Majka family. Over the years, naturalists, birdwatchers, scientists, reporters, and politicians found themselves drawn or summoned here. To many, Aquila represented a centre of — and catalyst for — change.

Now, the windows look hollow, the house turned in on itself. Cedar shingles on the walls sprout moss, and the roof appears shrunken. The fieldstone chimney crumbles beneath a tangle of Virginia creeper. Raspberry canes beside the house snatch at my mittens when I brush by. More abandoned machinery and vehicles litter the grounds. Not a sign remains of Mary's once-thriving flower gardens.

Despite the overcast sky, I can see northward across the valley to the city of Moncton, a half-hour's drive away. I comment on the view. David aims his binoculars to the east. "On a clear day, we could see Northumberland Strait and sometimes Prince Edward Island."

Behind the cottage is a stand of maples, ravaged by an ice storm more than a



Aquila, Caledonia Mountain, as it looked in April 2007. (Courtesy of Deborah Carr)

decade ago. David touches a twisted trunk. “This was a magnificent maple,” he says, his eyes tracing furrows in the bark. “It shaded our picnic table. We often ate outside.” He steps around alder branches to peer through a cloudy, cracked window. “In winter, the wind blew over the top of the house and snow drifted to the eaves, covering this window. We’d walk up the snowbank onto the roof for the view up there.”

David stands quietly for a moment.

His language becomes spare and thin, like him. He turns around. “The outhouse was there in the maple grove. Birdfeeders over there.”

The door to the house is unlocked so we enter together. The ceiling is caving and the floor strains upward. The walls bow in like a child sucking his cheeks. Wallpaper hangs in shreds, a mattress belches stuffing, and mildew etchings creep high up the walls. Books lie helter-skelter on the floor amid a scattering of stained pages.

David picks up a book and leafs through the pages. It is a medical text, the title print worn to a gold glint. “This must have been Mike’s.” He gently places it on a sagging table.

At the top of narrow stairs, David points out the alcove where he slept, his bed squeezed between the knee wall and stair rail. He indicates the single room shared

PREFACE

by Chris and Marc, the two Majka sons. Faded Charlie Brown and Snoopy stickers still adhere to the panelled walls.

Piles of animal excrement and the stench of urine confirm that a family of raccoons has set up housekeeping here. The smell seems not to bother David, but I find it hard to breathe and escape down the rickety stairs to the living room. David follows shortly. There, he stands for a moment and stares at the fireplace, now a pile of moss-covered river rock and chunked mortar. “At night, we’d gather together in the living room, fire crackling, and drink tea with honey and lemon.”

With a shrug, he turns away. We leave the house and I close the door.



Prelude

I find a shift in myself now. It has to do with age. I seem to reach back a lot and remember things that were always with me, but I think about them more often than before. I seem to reflect on the connections.

Mary and Mike Majka (My-kah) left Poland after World War II, immigrating to Canada in 1951 together with many other displaced persons (DPs). They lived first in Ontario before moving to New Brunswick in 1961, choosing to raise their family in the wildness of Caledonia Mountain. Within a decade of arriving in the province, Mary emerged as a visionary and a pioneer of New Brunswick's fledgling environmental movement. She became a spokesperson for nature, advocating for rare orchids and gray treefrogs. She initiated projects that led to the protection of ecologically sensitive natural habitats. She hosted a children's television show called *Have You Seen?*, taught outdoor education, and started the first nature centre for children in a Canadian national park. She was featured in national newspaper and magazine articles, books, and documentaries that heralded her heritage restoration and wildlife rehabilitation activities.

Over the course of three decades, her awards gathered like birds on a branch: the Heaslip Award for Environmental Stewardship, the National Heritage Award, the Canadian Healthy Environment Award for Lifetime Achievement, the Gulf of Maine Visionary Award, a Doctor of Science honorary degree from the University of New Brunswick, the Queen's Golden Jubilee Medal, the Order of New Brunswick, and the Tourism Industry of Canada VIA Rail Volunteer of the Year Award. Finally,



Mary Majka and Her Excellency, the Right Honourable Michaëlle Jean, at the investiture ceremony, Order of Canada, May 4, 2007.

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in 2007 — fifty-six years after arriving in Canada speaking not a word of English — she travelled to Ottawa to receive the Order of Canada from Governor General Michaëlle Jean.

The award honoured her lifetime involvement in projects associated with nature conservation, environmental advocacy, and heritage protection. Best known among these was the Mary's Point Ramsar site, which became Canada's first designated Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve. But her legacy extends beyond natural and cultural heritage preservation.

Mary feels ambivalent about her Order of Canada. She wrote to a long-time friend about the ceremony:

Most of what I did came from my own initiative or imagination, often dreamed up at night. It is tremendously exciting to see your dreams become reality, and it is this, not the accolades of others, that is the greatest reward. Of course, I like what I have done, but not for the reason you might think. . . . More than thirty youngsters shared in our family life for long or short durations. Today, when one of these [people] comes to me to say “you were my guiding light,” who needs an Order?

While she proudly wears her Order of Canada pin on her lapel wherever she goes, to be honest, she confides, receiving the Order of New Brunswick in 2005 perhaps meant more because it came from her own province. In recent years, she has received much recognition for her life's work of helping people connect with their surroundings in a meaningful way. She is respected as a naturalist, a protector, and a teacher. This is her public face.

Behind that face is another. One that belongs to the child of a Polish educator

PRELUDE



Mary Majka, 2004. (Courtesy of Donald Aguon)

and an Austrian countess; a child for whom nannies, spa vacations, and summers on the Baltic Sea were the norm; a child who swung on the pendulum from affluence to poverty and back; a child who faced grief and war alone, finding resilience in the strength of her ancestors and by focusing on the needs of others. This is the face few chance to see, but even this does not account for all of Mary.

During our many visits, I often found myself studying Mary's face. Her skin hangs loosely about the creases, etched by years in the sun. She is comfortable in that skin and has never bothered to adorn it. One who mattered in her life called her his "little Polish witch" and, later, his "Canadian Indian." I understand this. Her high cheekbones and prominent nose lend themselves to such description. Fine, pure white hair falls long below her shoulders, although you would not know this unless you glimpsed her rearranging it into the sparse, loose coil she always wears. Thin lips frame her mouth, and when she smiles, her face lights up. Eyebrows, scarce as her hair, have all but disappeared; however, the muscles holding their place still rise archly with a question or excitement or laughter.

When she laughs, her hands laugh with her, flying upward like startled sparrows. Often, reclining in her easy chair and immersed in the richness of a story, she unconsciously clicks the edges of her feet together in glee.

Her eyes. Tucked in a web of folds, their blue depths are faded and watery but retain the power to pierce. They reveal little and miss nothing, yet sometimes she finds it difficult to see herself. Her eyes are slow to tear and quick to crinkle in laughter and mischievousness. When they close, images from the past emerge as if on a movie screen, sometimes unbidden, unwanted. Those images evoke burdens, and sometimes pain.

This is the story of how a young Polish girl named Marysia faced sorrow and then war alone and through this discovered a healing connection to nature. It is the story of how she evolved into the award-winning woman known as Mary Majka, who played a key role in preserving the natural and cultural heritage of New Brunswick and encouraged others to pursue their passion and make their own mark on the world. But beneath all this, it is the story of finding sanctuary — of achieving that sacred place of acceptance and refuge, both in the world and within the soul.



The tide is on its ebb flow. At water's edge, a woman lies on her back, arms outstretched, palms skyward, feet pointed to the sea. Mud pillows her head and shoulders as the water swirls around her, lifting strands of her hair, tickling the shadowed crannies of her ears. Sunlight warms her tanned and lined face, gravity

smoothing its creases. Her body wavers with the rhythm of the tide, arms and legs briefly buoyant. Suspended between the elements, she is a creature of both, carrying the solidity of land and the fluidity of sea.

She is in and of the world, in communion with the bay, imagining cones of light penetrating her skin, reflecting as rays filter through water. She feels the familiar cadence of the tide as if it had been there all along, rocking in her soul. From birth, she'd always found comfort in water.

"You came out of me like a fish..."

She has been shaped by many places, but she belongs here at Mary's Point. There are those who assume the point was named after her, and this pleases her, but the scythe-shaped hook of land jutting into the Bay of Fundy was named for a different Mary: an Acadian Mi'kmaq outcast who bridged cultures and danced to her own music. A woman who, long ago, found sanctuary at Mary's Point and then death on the Fundy tides.

As the tide pulls back from the shore, the woman is left behind, like a piece of driftwood. The breeze cools her skin, drying the warm, briny water to a fine residue. She lies motionless, eyes closed, giving herself to sensation and sound.

Presently, her hearing sharpens, perceiving murmurs of life. Exposed mud crackles as millions of minute mud shrimp the size of a fingernail clipping emerge from flooded burrows to feed on algae left behind by the retreating tide. She feels the subtle movement of their activity beneath her resting fingertips.

She lies quiet... waiting, anticipating. Within moments, sound rolls over her like a wave and she is surrounded. Tens of thousands of migratory sandpipers and plovers flood the glistening flats, long beaks bobbing up and down, collecting the tiny shrimp. The birds had been resting on the sand and pebbled beach throughout high tide, waiting. Their gentle peeps and the patter of so many tri-pronged feet slapping the silt swells to a crescendo. She slowly turns her face sideways, opening her eyes to watch.

Everything in the world funnels down into the perfection and intensity of this moment. There is only the woman, the mud, the tide; the tiny shrimp beneath her fingertips, the sandpipers close enough to touch. Tears form at the outer corners of her eyes and overflow, rolling past her ears, down the curve of her neck, to drop onto the mud, mingling with the salty puddles left behind by the tide.



CHAPTER ONE

Origins

I remember being born. I remember things about the very beginning of my life. I can remember sucking on my mother's breast; today, I can still recall the scent of her.

Mary Majka and I are sitting in the “Bridge,” the split log and pine-panelled sunroom of her Mary’s Point home. Like a ship’s bridge, wide windows dominate the room, facing southward across the Bay of Fundy, which glimmers in the low winter sunlight like ruffled glass. Just beyond the windows are bare bushes, their fruit long since picked by birds that visit the feeders.

The room is filled with light and fragrance, flowering begonias, orchids, and memorabilia. One wall features a hornet nest, a Lars Larsen painting, and a chickadee quilt stitched by a friend. A forty-year-old Norfolk pine fills an entire corner while the leggy branches of a rubber plant cross the full width of the ceiling, suspended on hooks. A telescope stands by the window. Binoculars rest on the windowsill.

Mary is solicitous. She shows me where to sit and ensures that I am comfortable with my laptop. A serpentine-patterned wicker hamper rests at her feet, a mug of cold African tea at her elbow. “I call this my memory box,” she says. “It is filled with treasures.” She has been sorting papers and photographs to prepare for this day. She must do it in small measures; her memories weigh heavy.

Today, she has unearthed draft copies of letters and reports printed on the reverse side of emails, notes written on envelopes, and drawings on cardboard. She wastes

little. As if looking for a place to start, she shuffles through documents that record some of her achievements. Finally, she begins.

“I am thinking about those people who believe I do things to blow my own horn,” she says. “There is no need for me to make myself bigger and better. My background is such that I always knew I was somebody. I never had the feeling that I had to prove myself.”

She passes her hand slowly over a photograph of her mother and then continues.

“But to understand my ancestry and aristocratic roots, one has to understand something of the history and culture of Europe — it is not so straightforward. I will start with my mother. Her name was Maria Chorinska.”¹



Maria Brigitta Chorinska was born on November 9, 1893,² the middle child of Count Ignaz Chorinsky and Fanny Werner. Count Ignaz (Mary’s maternal grandfather) was descended from a prominent Polish family who joined King Jan Sobieski of Poland in helping Austria to turn back the Turkish armies of the Ottoman Empire during the 1683 Battle of Vienna. After the war, the Austrian emperor gave the Chorinsky brothers the title of count and a tract of land in Skalitz, Austria. Over the next two centuries, the Chorinsky descendants established a small village on the estate lands and remained closely associated with the Austrian court. The women commonly served as ladies-in-waiting to Austrian regents, and the men received their schooling in Vienna’s educational institutes reserved for aristocrats.

By the late 1800s, three Chorinsky brothers remained attached to the family estate. The eldest, an adventurer and traveller who enjoyed big-game hunting in Africa, finally returned home when his money ran out, while the youngest was killed in active duty in Bosnia in 1878. The other remaining brother, Ignaz, captained a boat along the Danube River between Vienna and the Black Sea. When his older brother’s spendthrift habits gradually destroyed the family inheritance, Ignaz returned to the Chorinsky estate in Skalitz hoping to prevent the inevitable financial ruin. He married Fanny Werner, the daughter of a wealthy merchant, in 1886. Their first daughter, Frieda, arrived in 1887, followed by Mary’s mother, Maria, and then a son, Leopold. After Ignaz’s efforts to revitalize the family fortunes failed, the brothers sold the estate and parted ways. The young couple settled nearby in Olmütz and Ignaz took work with the railway company there.³

Fanny was an elegant, gentle woman who easily assumed the new title of countess, although such distinctions meant little to her. Nonetheless, she exhibited

a quiet strength accompanied by a dignified bearing and strong sense of social responsibility, traits she passed on to her daughter Maria as she grew.

Although Maria was an intelligent girl and wanted to attend university, her parents felt that being a girl, she would be better served to learn the social graces. Thus, she educated herself by reading voraciously.

One evening in 1916, Fanny and her two daughters, young women by then, attended a lavish party at the home of the archbishop of Olmütz. It was here that Maria met the archbishop's archivist and researcher, a handsome young educator named Henryk Adler, who would become the father of Mary Majka.

Henryk Adler was born May 15, 1881, the son of Franz Adler (Mary's paternal grandfather), an Austrian engineer, and Maria Krynska (Mary's paternal grandmother), a Pole whose family had moved to Russia in 1762 as part of the agricultural reforms instigated by Catherine the Great. By the time Franz and Maria married, the Krynsky family had come to own prosperous plantations near Kiev in southern Russia.⁴ Franz and Maria Adler lived the vibrant, comfortable life of the Russian upper class. As with many non-Russians in their social position, they spoke Russian to their servants and their own language (in this case, Polish) among themselves, ensuring the continuity of their culture. Maria is remembered as a woman who cared for small creatures — like orphaned mice — that others might overlook and who might halt the carriage to gather wildflowers at the roadside, despite an abundance of blooms in her own garden.

Henryk and his sisters, Stanisława and Kazimiera, were taught by tutors at home before heading to Kiev for further schooling. Kazimiera became a doctor, while Stanisława, who was prone to depression, became a nun. Their father, Franz, died of pneumonia when Henryk was in high school, and his Austrian grandfather, Christian Adler, an historian, brought him to Vienna to complete his schooling. Exploring varied interests in history, geography, and astronomy, Henryk furthered his education in Galicia, Odessa, and Berlin. He then found employment in Odessa as a university lecturer and as a high school history and geography teacher. While preparing for his professorship exams, he also tutored the sons of an aristocratic Russian family.

In July 1914, Henryk and his employer's sons boarded a train to visit the boys' relatives in Paris. At the border of Austria-Hungary, all three were arrested because their papers identified them as Russian. Austria-Hungary had just declared war on Serbia and Russia. Henryk managed to send a message to the boys' uncle, the archbishop of Olmütz. Within two days, an opulent carriage arrived at the prison gates to pick up the three detainees. The boys went on to Paris, but the authorities



Henryk and Maria Adler the year they married.

released Henryk only after the boys' uncle promised to keep him under house arrest. The archbishop promptly put the young man to work organizing his archives.

Hence, Henryk found himself working as a "captive" archivist and researcher during the whole of World War I. The archbishop used his guest's presence as an excuse to host entertainment nights. One of these soirées was the party attended by Fanny Chorinska and her daughters.

Henryk and Maria became engaged in October 1917 and married in August 1919. A year earlier, the Russian Revolution had forced Henryk's mother and sisters to flee to Poland in a farmer's hay wagon. They left most of their possessions behind, taking only what they could carry. Their departure effectively severed Henryk's ties with Russia. However, far from missing his Russian connection, Henryk valued his Polish roots and considered himself a patriot. In the aftermath of World War I, Poland was finally free from occupation after a century of subservience, and he wanted to be part of the efforts to help rebuild the country. The archbishop secured Polish citizenship papers for him and a position in Poland as a tutor. In 1920,

Henryk became principal of a prestigious boys' school and moved with his wife, Maria, to the pastoral city of Częstochowa in southwestern Poland. Only then, feeling financially secure, did they decide to start a family.

Maria's first pregnancy ended in miscarriage. She spent much of the final trimester of her second pregnancy in bed, reflecting on the tiny life growing inside her. She prayed to the Madonna that her child would be born healthy and without incident. She promised that, if the baby were a girl, she would christen her Maria — not after herself but to express respect and thankfulness to the Virgin Mother. Meanwhile, she relieved the boredom of her confinement by sewing, embroidering, and singing melodies from her childhood. Maria hoped and expected that this peaceful, prayerful time would result in a quiet and demure child. Instead, she gave birth to a girl who, almost from the beginning, was anything but quiet and demure.

Mary Majka — named Emilia Maria Adler and called Marysia or Mi by her family — was born on March 9, 1923.

I remember my birth very clearly. I think of that day as a happy event, but I never considered it as the beginning of my life. I was “born” much earlier than that and have many feelings that started much earlier. I remember, as a child of two or three, trying to imitate that state again by lying in my bed with my head hanging down from the edge.

I was delivered at home, which was very normal at that time. My grandmother came to help and it was her voice and her hands that I remember most. I am pretty sure she was the one who held me first in her arms. My bond to her was always much stronger than to my mother, although my mother was a wonderful person and a good parent. Besides my grandmother, there was also a midwife present, and a doctor. I remember the face of that midwife and the touch of her much stronger hands, as opposed to my grandmother. She was the one who actually delivered me and it was a very easy delivery.

“You just slipped out of me like a fish,” my mother told me. I had a very small head and very long legs. My father only came into the room after I was cleaned and washed — O, that heavenly feeling of warmth and space in that bathtub! — as opposed to the cramped quarters I just came from. I remember the smell of my father's suit; he only held me a brief moment, but I was told I followed him with my eyes wherever he walked. I was very close to him all my life.

I also remember my mother's smell. That smell, which I did not particularly like, is still very strong in my memory, but it probably has

to do with my long nursing time — twelve months. Her milk had some of that smell too. It was sweet and I can still taste it. Besides the sound of voices, I could hear some other continuous sound. Perhaps it was raining because it was March and the rainy time in Poland. Or was it the wind? The room I was born in faced the garden with tall trees.

I was put into a basket and for about a month or so, this was my home. I remember that basket very well and can see it clearly — where it stood and how it looked inside. At the age of perhaps five, I asked my mother where that basket went, since my brother, who was born four years later, had not been put in the basket. My mother was astonished that I should remember it and asked me where I thought it stood. I showed her the place. Still, it took me quite a few years longer before I realized that not everybody could remember their birth or first years of life. I assumed that it was quite normal.⁵

The city of Częstochowa embraces a thirteenth-century monastery named Jasna Góra. The city's main boulevard flows like an artery from the monastery walls through the city. Jasna Góra is the most hallowed shrine in Poland, and throughout the centuries it has remained a touchstone for national identity, symbolizing Polish strength, liberty, and freedom. Roman Catholic Poles consider Częstochowa to be the holiest place in Poland and even today make regular pilgrimages there.⁶

In the 1920s, Henryk's role as schoolmaster gave him a position of prominence and respect in the city. The abbot of Jasna Góra was an occasional dinner guest in the Adler home and a fond friend; he insisted on christening Marysia at the monastery's chapel, a rare honour.

On the day of the christening, the Adlers' horse-drawn carriage clattered down the cobblestones of the chestnut-lined palisade leading to Jasna Góra. In the back of the carriage bobbed a large potted tree, a gift to the Virgin Mary from Maria, in thankfulness for a healthy child. She had nurtured the tree for several years. The child's christening took place in the ornate inner sanctuary of Jasna Góra, beneath the famous painting of Our Lady of Częstochowa, a Byzantine relic held in highest reverence by the Polish people. Tradition stated that St. Luke the Evangelist painted this image of the Virgin Mary and Jesus on a wooden tabletop that had come from the house of the Holy Family in Nazareth. Also called the Black Madonna for the shade of the Virgin's facial features, devout Poles believed it harboured spiritual powers of protection.⁷

Whether due to the special circumstances of her christening or simply to her inherent nature, Emilia Maria Adler would grow up to follow her own spiritual



Marysia, age one, 1924.

pilgrimages throughout her long life. Her very name conveys a self-fulfilling destiny: Emilia means industrious; Maria means bitter. Even the name Adler, which means eagle, seems significant. The eagle is the national symbol of Poland and a universal emblem of courage and vision. There would come many times in Marysia's life when it appeared both forces of divine protection and destiny just might be at play.

The Adlers' upper middle-class apartment was part of a long row of three-storey residences on one of the city's main boulevards. Placement of a family's apartment denoted social status; those on the ground floor were the wealthiest, those on the

second floor had the next enviable spot, while the lower classes had to trudge flights of stairs to the top. The dank, cold basements were reserved for the poorest.

An arched entryway between two stone and stucco buildings led to a rectangular courtyard. The Adlers' apartment lay above that of the building's owner. Their windows and balcony overlooked the courtyard and an enclosed garden. A large lilac grew beside the balcony, and as a baby, Marysia lay for hours in her bassinet inhaling the fragrance of its blossoms, watching the play of light on leaves, listening to birdsong, and entertaining herself with the movement of her hands.

As soon as Marysia was old enough, her nanny took her to the garden. Hand in hand they would walk through the courtyard to the entrance gate. They discovered fossilized designs etched upon the garden's stone walls that her nanny explained were ancient sea snails called ammonites. They also found land snails among the stone pathways, flowers, and large shrubs.

I remember they were very beautiful with a lovely pattern on their shells. I would admire them and my nanny would pick them up and show me how they hide their feelers. I learned to look at and appreciate beauty, but not to disturb or harm it. I was taught we lived in harmony with nature and you didn't kill everything that moved. Perhaps this is where my initial understanding of our relationship with nature started.

Beyond the garden was the central courtyard: a noisy, active place where chickens and pigs clucked and squealed in wooden stalls. Marysia could watch the courtyard activity from her apartment window. "I was never allowed in the courtyard alone," she explains, "because this is where the poor children played." Itinerant vendors peddled their wares, enticing customers with rapid staccato rhetoric. The community pump provided water for those without indoor taps and served as a public gathering place. Neighbours filled the benches surrounding the pump, sitting for hours to chat and share news. Occasionally a *Leiermann*, or travelling minstrel, arrived with a street organ and a monkey or parrot.

In summer, peasants from across Poland journeyed to Częstochowa for the religious celebrations at Jasna Góra. The apartment owner rented space in the courtyard to the pilgrims and their necessary livestock. Marysia particularly loved these times, staring from her dining room window at those who had come from afar to sing, pray, and show devotion to the Black Madonna.

Marysia's schooling began at age three when she joined several other children for kindergarten. Classes took place in a different apartment each week, and a private

ORIGINS



Marysia and her mother, Maria, 1925.



Marysia (age five) with her brother, Heniek (age one), 1928.

teacher instructed them in physical exercises, crafts, and theatre. After two years of kindergarten, her schooling continued at home, where her mother taught her to read and write and calculate sums.

Marysia was four when her brother, Henryk, was born at home on October 27, 1927. Fanny travelled to Częstochowa to keep Marysia occupied. The two of them spent much of the day walking in the park, collecting chestnuts, and playing games. As evening approached, they sat in the guest room before glowing coals in the stove as her *Grossmutter* read a story out loud in German. Fanny, whose mother tongue was German, believed that learning languages was integral to a European education. She wanted Marysia to speak and read German as well as Polish.

Following the delivery, Fanny took her granddaughter in to see her new baby brother. They bonded immediately. While Marysia became particularly fond of Henryk, whom they called Heniek, she admitted to feeling some envy over his eyes, which were deep violet with long lashes.